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Haiping Chen

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Social Work in Mainland China: Past, Present, and Future

Haiping Chen

Department of Sociology, Peking University, China

ABSTRACT

Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China has made great progress in the reconstruction and development of social work profession. From a historical perspective, this article first describes China's distinct approach to social work development over the past century. It then introduces the four main social work service delivery models now often adopted in China, including the university-community partnership model, the organizationally embedded service model, services provided by the local semiprofessional social workers, and the social work practice research model. Finally, the future directions for China's social work development from a "big social work" perspective are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Social work; mainland China; service delivery models

A Top-down Approach to the Professional Development

As an imported product, social work was first introduced to mainland China by missionaries from the west at the beginning of the twentieth century. The landmark events included the establishments of Beijing Students' Social Service Club by John Burgess in 1912, of East Shanghai Commune by Daniel Kulp in 1917, and of the Social Service Department of Peking Union Medical College Hospital by Ida Pruitt in 1921, to name a few (Peng, 2016). During the same period, Shanghai College and Yenching University founded the Department of Sociology in 1914 and 1922, respectively, both of which played an influential role in the early Chinese social work education. Between the 1910s and 1950s, several social work fields of practice were initially developed in China such as urban social work (e.g., social services provided by the East Shanghai Commune for local workers in urban communities), rural social work (e.g., the rural development experiment of Qinghe town in Beijing), medical social work (e.g., psychosocial services provided by social workers in hospitals), and child welfare social work (e.g., social services provided by the Xiangshan Children's Home in Beijing for the

orphaned and poor children). Unfortunately, due to a national campaign of reorganization of higher education institutions in 1952, all disciplines like sociology (including its sub-discipline social work) and anthropology in Chinese universities and colleges were canceled by the government, whose main goals were to reduce the influence of western religions on China's education system and to learn the Soviet-style education to advance China's industrialization process. Subsequently, Chinese social work fell into stagnation in its development for almost 30 years.

In 1978, China started to open up and reform its economy, which brought about new problems during the process of economic and social transformation, especially the conflicts between the beneficiaries and losers of the reform. In this context, the government began to rethink the role that social work could play as a soft power in solving the hard problems facing Chinese society. Since then, social work has entered into the stage of reconstruction and development in China. Between the 1980s and 1990s, guided by the principle of "education first", the development of Chinese social work was mainly driven by the higher education, which did not only focus on the design and development of social work

education and training programs but also aimed to improve social recognition of social work through the provision of professional services by social work educators and students. However, the development of social work over this decade was slow. In 2006, the sixth plenary session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) reviewed and adopted the “Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Major Issues Concerning the Construction of a Harmonious Socialist Society”, in which the Chinese government officially put forth a strategic task of cultivating a large number of social work professionals to help address the social problems brought about by the economic reform. Given the strong endorsement from the government, social work has begun to gain the public’s attention and gradually find its voice in China. At that time, there was a popular saying in Chinese social work community: “The spring for social work is coming”. Indeed, social work in China ushered in the golden decade of professional development from 2006 to 2016.

According to the brief review on the history of Chinese social work, it is obvious that the rise and fall of social work in China has been greatly affected by the needs of the CPC, the government, and the society. Because of such a top-down approach to the professional development, the scale and scope of social work services is mainly determined and arranged by the government. For example, the Chinese government issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of a Team of Social Work Professionals” in 2011. It was the first formal document issued by the central government that served as a nationwide guide to the development of social work professionals in China, indicating in which areas social workers could seek to capture the role and remit of social work grounded in its values and principles. With the enormous support from the government, the core areas of practice nowadays for Chinese social workers encompass the assistance for the needy, conflict mediation and resolution, psychological counseling, behavior modification, relationship adjustment, grassroots governance, and so on, which does not only aim to address the demands and challenges of everyday living for the vulnerable populations, but also assists the

government with its efforts to construct a stable and harmonious socialist society. In this sense, Chinese social workers are often engaged in a dual client service system, meaning that they need to serve both individual clients and society at large. A typical example is social work practice with the petitioners that strive to present their grievances to the higher authorities, which easily gets Chinese social workers into an ethical dilemma, that is, how to properly cope with the conflicts between the interest of the petitioners and the stability of the society. Actually, it is quite crucial for social workers to take a collective perspective to provide services for individuals by building a collaborative relationship with the Chinese bureaucratic systems. Otherwise, they may find it difficult to obtain the necessary resources for maximizing the well-being of individual clients.

The Indigenized Models for the Service Delivery

Learning from the west, China has already developed the similar social work education programs, practice fields, and professional organizations like its western counterparts. However, great efforts have also been made to explore the indigenized models for the effective delivery of social work services in the context of China. Here four kinds of social work service delivery models with distinctive Chinese features are introduced, including the university-community partnership model, the organizationally embedded service model, services provided by the local semiprofessional social workers, and the social work practice research model.

As mentioned above, the reconstruction and development of Chinese social work has been greatly driven by the principle of “education first” since the 1980s. During the early stage of social work development, Chinese people seldom knew what was social work and who were social workers, let alone proactively seeking help from social workers. At that time, in order to find the practice fields for the students as well as to increase the social recognition of social work, social work educators developed the university-community partnership model to deliver the professional services. They cooperated with the community

residents' committees that are the agents of the government at the grassroots level in China, offered services to the needy individuals and families identified and referred by the committees, and thus applied the professional knowledge and skills to address the residents' needs and promote the community development. Till now, the university-community partnership model is still frequently used for the social work service delivery, particularly given that there are not enough professional social workers in many Chinese communities. To solve the shortage of professional social workers at the community level, it is required by the government that a certain proportion of the residents' committee staff should pass the National Social Workers' Professional Level Examination. As a result, the university-community partnership is considered as a win-win scenario and promoted by the Chinese government. On the one hand, social work educators and students can do the field work and provide professional services for the vulnerable persons and families with the endorsement of the residents' committees; on the other hand, the residents' committee staff can have an opportunity to learn social work knowledge and skills from the social work educators and students so as to tackle the community issues in a more effective manner.

Besides cooperating with communities, social work educators, students, and graduates have also extended their services by building partnerships or signing the employment contracts with various institutions and organizations in both private and public sectors (e.g., hospitals, nursing homes, children's homes, All-China Women's Federation, and civil affairs departments). It should be noted that social work positions in these institutions and organizations are often set up by the central government from the top down according to its analysis of the social needs. For instance, in order to more effectively respond to the emerging demands of the institutionalized elders, it is required by the government that every integrated medical and elder care institution should be equipped with professional social workers. Unsurprisingly, with the strong support from the government, social work services have been quickly embedded into all kinds of institutions and organizations that deal with human needs

and social development issues. Furthermore, as the core driving force to advance the development of social work in China, social work educators are even expected and encouraged by the government to establish their own service organizations. Such educator-led social work service organizations have become increasingly popular over the past decade in China, which helps to extend the professional services to more clients at multiple levels (e.g., individual, family, group, and community) as well as to increase the internship and employment opportunities for social work students. In particular, owing to the vigorous support from the local governments, social work educators in Guangdong, Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing are highly motivated to establish their own service organizations, some of which have already become the role-model organizations (e.g., Qichuang Social Work Service Center by Sun Yat-Sen University, Pengxing Social Work Service Organization by Shenzhen University, Shanghai Oriental Agency for Social Work by East China University of Science and Technology, and Beijing Zhongqing Social Work Development Center by China Youth University of Political Studies).

In addition to the educator-led service organizations, other social work service organizations like those that were founded by entrepreneurs or other stakeholders have also been developed rapidly in recent years. As of the end of 2021, there have been more than 13,000 social work service organizations across the nation (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). These organizations are usually small and their core services mainly involve child welfare, youth development, elder care, family problems, and community governance. Special attention has been paid by the organizations to the disabled, the elderly, migrant workers in the cities, left-behind children in rural areas, and women suffering domestic violence. It is not difficult to see that at the organizational level, social work services have already been embedded into China's welfare systems in two main ways: one is to establish the social work service organizations, particularly the educator-led service organizations; and the other is to create new social work job positions in the existing institutions and organizations. At present, the organizationally embedded service model in both

private and public spheres has been greatly promoted by the government and gradually become the mainstreamed model for the social work service delivery in China. In fact, the emergence of such a model, especially of social work service organizations, is directly related to the transformation of government functions in China, that is, from a “big government” to a “big society”. In 2013, the Chinese government officially issued the “Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council for the Government Procurement of Services from the Social Forces”, which has created an important opportunity for Chinese social workers to undertake the public services outsourced by the government, thereby promoting the development of social work service organizations in recent decade. Under such circumstances, the government has further proposed and implemented a plan of building social work stations at the street level in urban cities as well as the township and village levels in rural areas since 2020. By the end of 2021, more than 17,000 social work stations have been built across the country, attracting more than 5,000 social work service organizations and 40,000 social workers to embed the professional services into the stations that have helped a total of 187,900 clients (Lei et al., 2022).

Although the cultivation of social work professionals has made significant progress since 2006, a large number of social work graduates who receive the professional education and training actually do not prefer to become the frontline workers or take other professional jobs because of the low salaries, the large caseload, the insufficient support, the little recognition, or the emotional burnout. It has resulted in a practical dilemma in China, that is, an increase in the number of well-educated social work professionals but a lack of professional social workers in various practice settings. In order to address this issue, a social work service delivery model that focuses on the cultivation of local semiprofessional social workers has emerged in China. In this model, some of the former clients, active residents, or enthusiastic volunteers are selected, trained, and supervised by the social work professionals. Through the short-term courses, regular workshops, and ongoing supervision, these persons are equipped with the essential social

work knowledge and skills and become the semi-professional social workers in the local communities. They are able to offer some social work services under supervision for the clients facing similar life challenges or having other urgent needs. Take Beijing Social Work Development Center for Facilitators as an example. This organization was established in 2003 and strives to improve the well-being of migrant workers and their children in the cities. It has launched a branding service program called “Facilitators College” for years. The program gives the migrant workers an opportunity to learn the social work knowledge and skills and devote themselves to helping others and making changes. Given the shortage of professional social workers in the practice settings, the development of semiprofessional social workers is very important in China, which helps to meet the increasing demands of the vulnerable populations particularly those in rural areas and ethnic minority communities.

Since the early twenty first century, a new research concept called “social work practice research” has attracted a great deal of attention from Chinese social workers, which emphasizes that research and practice should go hand in hand through the multi-stakeholder collaboration so as to improve the effectiveness of social work services. Compared to other social science research (e.g., sociological research) and non-practice research on social work, social work practice research has at least four distinct traits, including collaboration among multiple actors, reflection on social work, immediate change in practice, and production of ethno-knowledge (Chen, 2024). Due to the goal of integrating practice and research as well as to the strong emphasis on practice processes and outcomes, practice research has gradually become an emerging model of social work service delivery in China. Mainly relying on the participatory action research methods, Chinese social workers have conducted the practice research in many different areas such as rural social work, ethnic minority social work, and social work for the disabled. For instance, adopting the social work practice research approach, Ku (2022) built a transdisciplinary research team involving social workers, anthropologists, agricultural experts, and natural

scientists to explore the strategies for alleviating the poverty of the Chinese peasants in an ethnic minority village. During the research process, the team also provided the social work services that successfully helped the peasants return to the organic farming, build the rural-urban sales channels, and find an alternative model for agricultural development and poverty eradication. Obviously, through the collaborative process of practice and research, social work practice research can be considered as a promising service delivery model whose effectiveness is strongly supported by the ongoing research.

A “Big Social Work” for the Future Development

In March 2023, the Ministry of Social Work of the People’s Republic of China was established, which has greatly cheered Chinese social workers across the country. However, it has also caused a lot of confusion about the functions of the new agency and the roles of social work under its jurisdiction. The work in the realm of social work was formerly handled by the Ministry of Civil Affairs that stresses the roles of social work in poverty alleviation and assistance to the needy. But it seems that the responsibilities assumed by the Ministry of Social Work need to extend beyond the traditional realm of social work. In this context, the concept of “big social work” has been highlighted and discussed by the Chinese scholars (Wang, 2023). From the “big social work” perspective, the social work services should not only cover the routine professional services for the vulnerable populations but also include the promotion of socioeconomic development and participation in social governance. Especially, social work is expected to serve as a linker to mobilize and engage all kinds of social forces in the collaborative governance. Because the development of social work in China greatly depends on the strong top-down impetus, the practice of social work needs to follow the dual service logics, that is, helping people help themselves and helping the nation govern well. Such service logics have become more prominent under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Work. Therefore, the future development for China’s social work is

bound to exceed the original scope of social work defined by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. For example, in addition to the generalist and specialist social work, the bureaucratic social work may also be generated in response to the professional development and social governance issues under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Work. To sum up, from the “big social work” perspective, Chinese social work will gradually expand its services from the social sphere to the social, economic, and political spheres.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Haiping Chen received her PhD degree from Indiana University School of Social Work. She is currently an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology of Peking University. Her areas of research include gerontological social work, health social work, and civic engagement of older adults.

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